

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS



# READER'S GUIDE

## A Farewell to Arms

by Ernest Hemingway



# Table of Contents

## A Farewell to Arms

About the Book.....	3
About the Author .....	4
Historical and Literary Context .....	6
Other Works/Adaptations.....	8
Discussion Questions.....	10
Additional Resources .....	11
Credits .....	12

### Preface

Ernest Hemingway is the notorious tough guy of modern American letters, but it would be hard to find a more tender and rapturous love story than *A Farewell to Arms*. It would also be hard to find a more harrowing American novel about World War I. Hemingway masterfully interweaves these dual narratives of love and war, joy and terror, and—ultimately—liberation and death.

It will surprise no one that a book so vivid and deeply felt originated in the author's own life. Hemingway served as an ambulance driver for the Italian army in World War I. Severely wounded, he recuperated in a Red Cross hospital in Milan where he fell in love with one of his nurses. This relationship proved the model for Frederic and Catherine's tragic romance in *A Farewell to Arms*.



“All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you...”

### What is The Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, The Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining The Big Read.



# About the Book

## Introduction to the Book

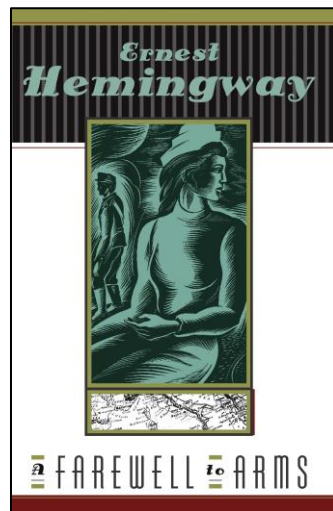
Ernest Hemingway's third novel, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), was crafted from his earliest experience with war. As a teenager just out of high school, Hemingway volunteered to fight in the First World War but was rejected because of poor eyesight. Instead, he drove a Red Cross ambulance on the Italian front, where he was wounded in 1918 by a mortar

shell. While recovering in a hospital, Hemingway fell in love with Agnes von Kurowsky, a nurse seven years his senior. She did not reciprocate his passion, however, and rejected his marriage proposal five months after their first meeting.

These events were thinly fictionalized by Hemingway a decade later into *A Farewell to Arms*, with its tragic love story between an American ambulance driver and an English nurse. Lieutenant Frederic Henry meets Catherine Barkley in a small town near the Italian Alps. Though Catherine still mourns the death of her fiancé, killed in the war, she encourages Frederic to pursue her. Badly wounded at the front, Frederic finds himself bedridden in a Milan hospital, but Catherine arrives to look after him. It is here that their initial romance deepens into love. While Frederic recovers from surgery and prepares to return to action, Catherine discovers that she is pregnant—a surprise that delights and frightens them both. Though the couple has escaped the war, there are dangers that cannot be anticipated or avoided. The final chapter is one of the most famous, and heartbreaking, conclusions in modern literature.

This rather simple plot does not explain the appeal of *A Farewell to Arms*. It is Hemingway's writing style that transforms the story into a great tragedy. The critic Malcolm Cowley considered it "one of the few great war stories in American literature; only *The Red Badge of Courage* and a few short pieces by Ambrose Bierce can be compared with it." By omitting most adjectives and using short, rhythmic sentences, Hemingway tried to give the reader a sense of immediacy, of actually witnessing the events in his writing. He once described his method this way: "I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg." His spare prose and laconic dialogue made him the

most widely imitated American writer of the twentieth century.



# About the Author

## Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)

Ernest Hemingway may have been the most famous novelist in the English language during his lifetime. Idolized by readers, envied by fellow writers, and adored by many for the romantic lifestyle that he created for himself, Hemingway the writer must always be distinguished from Hemingway the public figure. The first was a sensitive and exacting artist; the second was a larger-than-life image maintained for

tabloid consumption. As early as 1929, Dorothy Parker was moved to remark: "Probably of no other living man has so much tripe been penned or spoken."

The adulation that Hemingway inspired is not difficult to explain. By turns tough and tender, he lived a life of exuberant masculinity—which included hunting for big game in Africa, for Nazi submarines in his fishing boat off Key West, or for the best bar in Paris. He celebrated bullfighting, boxing, hunting, and even warfare as manly pursuits worthy of respect. His years were rife with adventurous accident, including an anthrax infection while on honeymoon in France, and two successive plane crashes on safari. Second-degree burns resulting from a bushfire accident prevented him from traveling to Sweden to accept the Nobel Prize. He won the Silver Medal of Military Honor in the First World War and the Bronze Star Medal in the Second. A leader of the so-called "Lost Generation" and a Modernist, Hemingway's closest friendships included literary giants Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and James Joyce. He was an intellectual and a celebrity, and one of the few Americans to find both roles congenial. He married four times and lived to see eighteen of his works published. He died a millionaire, a close friend of movie stars such as Gary Cooper, and a winner of both the Pulitzer and Nobel prizes. In many ways, his career was the stuff of legends.

Such success did not, however, alleviate his personal struggles. For a man so publicly celebrated and revered, he could be curiously reticent—he wanted no biography written about his life, and he left a will that blocked any publication of his letters. His later years were marked by severe depression, for which he underwent electro-convulsive therapy. Suffering from acute paranoia, he believed for a time that federal agents were after him. Years of alcoholism



Ernest Hemingway in Paris, 1928 (The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston)

and organ damage wreaked havoc on his body; digestive complications, high blood pressure, and failing eyesight troubled him constantly. Ernest Hemingway eventually committed suicide in 1961, following the path of his father and two siblings.

## Hemingway and the Lost Generation

Though he had served as an ambulance driver during the First World War, Ernest Hemingway's decisive years in Europe started in 1921, when he arrived in France with a letter of introduction from the writer Sherwood Anderson. In those postwar years, Paris had become the home of many expatriate writers, including Ezra Pound, James Joyce, E. E. Cummings, Ford Madox Ford, and Gertrude Stein. Hart Crane and F. Scott Fitzgerald were frequent visitors. It was this circle of mostly American writers that Hemingway joined when he arrived; and while "the Lost Generation" was Gertrude Stein's phrase, it was Hemingway who immortalized it in the epigraph for his 1926 novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. The book was so popular that, by 1934, Malcolm Cowley could note, "It was a good novel and became a craze—young men tried to get as imperturbably drunk as the hero, young women of good families took a succession of lovers in the same heartbroken fashion as the heroine, they all talked like Hemingway characters and the name was fixed."

Recently married and employed as a foreign correspondent for the *Toronto Star* newspaper, Hemingway spent his days interviewing leaders such as Mussolini and writing fiction. He soon became Ford's assistant editor at *The Transatlantic Review*, an important literary magazine. In 1923, the American author and publisher Robert McAlmon printed Hemingway's first book, *Three Stories and Ten Poems*, in Paris. Hemingway would later complain that all he earned from this book "was the enmity of McAlmon, because it sold out while his own volumes remained in stock."

Another American, Sylvia Beach, opened a bookshop called Shakespeare & Company in 1919, and it soon became a center of literary life in Paris. The store even loaned its poorer patrons rare books, such as D. H. Lawrence's banned *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. It was shut down in 1941 supposedly because Beach would not allow a German officer to buy the last copy of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*; Beach had been the first to print Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1922.

Why were so many American writers living abroad? Paris was a cheap place after the war, with none of the strictures to be found back home, such as Prohibition. Daring innovators in all the arts lived there—like Picasso, Stravinsky,

and Modigliani—and many were neighbors in the cheap districts of Montparnasse. The artistic and intellectual ferment of those years moved Hemingway to write: "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast."

*"Every man becomes civilized between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. If he does not go through a civilizing experience at that time of his life, he will not become a civilized man. The men who went to war at eighteen missed the civilizing ... All you young people who served in the war are a lost generation. You have no respect for anything."*  
—Gertrude Stein



# Historical and Literary Context

## The Life and Times of Ernest Hemingway

### 1890s

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- 1899: Ernest Miller Hemingway is born on July 21 in Oak Park, Illinois.

### 1910s

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- 1912: Woodrow Wilson is elected president.
- 1914: World War I begins, ends in 1918.
- 1918: Hemingway serves as an ambulance driver; he is wounded in July.

### 1920s

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- 1920: Prohibition goes into effect on January 16.
- 1921: Hemingway marries Hadley Richardson, and moves to Paris.
- 1922: James Joyce's *Ulysses* published in Paris.
- 1929: *A Farewell to Arms* published; Hemingway's father commits suicide.

### 1930s

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- Hemingway's two memoirs, *Death in the Afternoon* and *Green Hills of Africa*, published, 1932 and 1935.
- 1933: Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany.
- 1937-38: Hemingway travels as a war correspondent to the Spanish Civil War.

### 1940s

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- 1940: The first inexpensive paperback appears; *For Whom the Bell Tolls* published.
- 1941: Japanese forces bomb Pearl Harbor; America enters World War II.
- Hemingway travels with American troops as a correspondent.

### 1950s

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- 1952: *The Old Man and the Sea* published.
- 1954: Hemingway awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.
- Gen. Charles de Gaulle becomes French premier in 1957, and remains in power until 1969.

### 1960s

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- 1960: John F. Kennedy elected president.
- 1961: U.S. breaks diplomatic relations with Cuba. Hemingway commits suicide in Ketchum, Idaho, on July 2.
- 1964: *A Moveable Feast* edited by Hemingway's fourth wife and published.

## Hemingway and World War I

When the United States declared war on Germany and entered World War I in April 1917, the fighting in Europe had been going on for three years. America joined the Allies, led by France, England, Russia, and Italy, who had been fighting Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey). Antiquated nineteenth-century battlefield tactics combined with the innovations of modern warfare led to a monumental loss of life. At the Battle of the Somme in July 1916, British forces launched a relentless barrage of ordnance on German trenches that lasted six days. British soldiers were quickly killed by machine gun and rifle fire. By the time the battle ended, Britain had suffered 400,000 casualties; the French 200,000; and 450,000 Germans also lay dead in what was one of the bloodiest battles ever.

By 1917, however, such atrocities had not touched America. Heeding President Wilson's admonition to "make the world safe for Democracy," young American boys enlisted in droves. While the public could "Beat Back the Hun with Liberty Bonds," these young men saw a chance to be a part of history—the "War to End All Wars."

Ernest Hemingway was determined to be part of the action, but an eye defect kept him out of the main branches of the military. Hemingway was undaunted. In April 1918 he applied to the Red Cross to drive ambulances in Italy and was accepted. He passed his physical exam and was fitted for a uniform that gave him the honorary rank of 1st Lieutenant.

Hemingway arrived in Milan in early June and was stationed at Schio in the Dolomite hills northwest of Venice. He saw little action. Frustrated, and with a desire to be closer to the front, Hemingway requested transfer to the Red Cross's "rolling canteen" service, which operated along the more contested Piave River.

He had only been in Italy for about two weeks when he was nearly killed just after midnight on July 12, 1918, while distributing chocolate and cigarettes. The fragments of an Austrian trench mortar shell (called a *Minenwerfer*) ripped into Hemingway's legs and killed several men around him. Despite his own wounds, he heaved one injured man into a fireman's carry and began to move him back toward the command post. A machine gun then ripped open Hemingway's right knee. The two men collapsed but somehow made it to safety. For this feat, Hemingway would later be awarded the Italian Croce di Guerra—the silver medal for valor.

# Other Works/Adaptations

## Hemingway and His Other Works

The works of Ernest Hemingway have a long and varied publication history. Some have disappeared, like the stolen early stories that his first wife mislaid; others are ignored, like his first novel, *The Torrents of Spring* (1926), and his only play, *The Fifth Column* (1938). Several novels and dozens of short stories are considered classics—and though Hemingway died in 1961, works bearing his name have appeared as recently as 1999.

Only 300 copies of Hemingway's first book, *Three Stories and Ten Poems* (1923), were printed in Paris. The short story collection *In Our Time* (1925) cemented Hemingway's reputation as one of the finest American writers alive.

F. Scott Fitzgerald convinced Hemingway that he should dump his current publisher and sign with Scribner, where Maxwell Perkins (who also worked with Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe) would serve as his editor. In order to do so, Hemingway needed to write an "unpublishable" book to break his three-book contract. So, he wrote *The Torrents of Spring* (1926) in ten days; it arrived in the same year as his classic *The Sun Also Rises*.

In 1929, *A Farewell to Arms* became Hemingway's first bestseller, selling 100,000 copies in twelve months. It was adapted for the stage a year later and has been made into a film twice. The same year that he divorced his first wife, he published more stories in *Men Without Women* (1927). The bullfighting memoir *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) was followed by the safari hunting memoir *Green Hills of Africa* (1935).

By now, Hemingway had established a pattern—each mediocre book was followed by a masterpiece. His novel *To Have and Have Not* (1937) is as neglected today as *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) is celebrated. *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950) had critics calling him a has-been—a charge they had to retract when *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) won the Pulitzer Prize.

After his death, Hemingway's unfinished manuscripts continued to appear for many years—most notably the Paris memoir *A Moveable Feast* (1964), and the two novels *Islands in the Stream* (1970) and *The Garden of Eden* (1986). His *Selected Letters* appeared in 1981, followed by the *Complete Short Stories* in 1987; while *True at First Light*, billed as Hemingway's last posthumous work, was edited by his son Patrick and released to commemorate his 100th birthday in 1999.

## Hemingway at the Movies

*A Farewell to Arms* was made into a movie twice: the 1932 adaptation, starring Gary Cooper and Helen Hayes, is generally considered superior to the 1957 extravaganza with Rock Hudson and Jennifer Jones in the lead roles. The latter movie should have been a great success—directed by the legendary John Huston, it was to be the last film produced by David O. Selznick, who had made *Gone with the Wind*. However, Selznick replaced Huston with Charles Vidor mid-picture, after the pair clashed over the sentimental direction that Selznick wanted. It was not an inspired substitution. With Hudson and Jones overacting in every scene, the film can be hard to watch.

The 1932 version, directed by Frank Borzage, is better—and half as long. It won an Oscar for Charles Lang's gorgeous black-and-white cinematography. Gary Cooper, who played the lead role both here and in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943), became for many people the personification of Hemingway's heroes. The scenes in *A Farewell to Arms* with Cooper and Helen Hayes are intense (Hayes reportedly fell in love with her co-star on the set), and the film has a stark and brooding energy. The movie is not, however, entirely faithful to the book. Worried that audiences would dislike the grim ending, Paramount Pictures ordered that an alternate, upbeat finale be added. Hemingway was hardly thrilled with the result.

There are plenty of other Hemingway books to savor on screen. One of the best is Howard Hawks's *To Have and Have Not* (1944), which sizzles with the chemistry between Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall (who also fell in love on the set). With a screenplay co-written by the great novelist William Faulkner, the film is considered a classic—including some of the most memorable dialogue ever written. The movie's plot hardly resembles the book, but then Hemingway supposedly made a bet with Hawks that the director would find the novel impossible to film.

Another great movie is Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946), a film noir starring Burt Lancaster (in his debut) and Ava Gardner. Based on one of Hemingway's short stories, *The Killers* is the tale of a duped ex-boxer who turns into a crook and then a victim for the sake of a dangerous woman. Nominated for four Academy Awards, the film made Ava Gardner a movie star and a sex symbol almost overnight. Reportedly, this was Hemingway's favorite movie made from his work.

Other Hemingway-inspired films include John Sturges's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1958) with a grizzled Spencer Tracy as the lonely fisherman. And good luck finding a copy of *The Sun Also Rises* (1957). Despite its all-star cast with Tyrone



Power, Errol Flynn, and Ava Gardner, it has never been released on video or DVD.

## **Selected Works by Hemingway**

- *In Our Time*, 1925 (stories)
- *The Sun Also Rises*, 1926 (novel)
- *A Farewell to Arms*, 1929 (novel)
- *Death in the Afternoon*, 1932 (non-fiction)
- *Green Hills of Africa*, 1935 (non-fiction)
- *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 1940 (novel)
- *The Old Man and the Sea*, 1952 (novel)
- *A Moveable Feast*, 1964 (non-fiction)
- *Islands in the Stream*, 1970 (novel)

# Discussion Questions

1. What do we know of Frederic Henry's and Catherine Barkley's lives before the novel begins? As the novel's narrator, why would Frederic choose to tell us so little about their past?
2. At the beginning of their romance, Frederic treats his relationship with Catherine like a game. When does he fall in love? Why does it happen?
3. What role does religion play in the novel? How does Frederic's view of the priest compare to the other officers'?
4. Why is Catherine afraid of the rain? Why does Frederic fear the night? How do both the rain and the night foreshadow the novel's tragic conclusion?
5. Even before the retreat at Caporetto, Frederic considers that "abstract words such as glory, honor, courage" are "obscene beside the concrete names of villages." What does he mean by this?
6. Identify a passage that vividly describes World War I. Does the novel make any assertions about war in general, or World War I in particular?
7. After his desertion, Frederic says that, "anger was washed away in the river along with any obligation." Are his actions justified?
8. The novel's action begins in the late summer of 1915; it ends in spring 1918. Has Frederic changed during this period of time? Is there any redemption at the end of this tragedy?
9. Toward the end of the novel, Count Greffi tells Frederic that love is a religious feeling. Does Frederic agree? Why or why not?
10. How would you describe Hemingway's style of writing and his characters' dialogue?
11. The words "bravery" and "courage" are echoed through the novel. Who is the novel's hero? Who is the most courageous character?

# Additional Resources

## Resources on Hemingway and the Lost Generation

- Bruccoli, Matthew J. *Fitzgerald and Hemingway: A Dangerous Friendship*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 1994.
- Hemingway, Ernest, and Carlos Baker, ed. *Ernest Hemingway Selected Letters: 1917-1961*. New York: Scribner, 2003.
- Phillips, Larry W., ed. *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*. New York: Scribner, 1984.
- Reynolds, Michael. *Hemingway: The Paris Years*. New York: Norton, 1989.

## If you're interested in World War I, you might also enjoy reading:

- John Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers*, 1921
- E. E. Cummings's *The Enormous Room*, 1922
- Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929
- Robert Graves's *Good-Bye to All That*, 1929

## If you're interested in the Lost Generation of writers, you might also enjoy reading:

- F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*, 1934
- Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return*, 1934
- Robert McAlmon's *Being Geniuses Together*, 1938
- Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*, 1964

## Websites

- [The Ernest Hemingway Society](http://www.hemingwaysociety.org/) was established in 1965 by Mary Hemingway, Ernest's widow.  
<http://www.hemingwaysociety.org/>
- [The Hemingway Review](http://hemingwaysociety.org/?page_id=10) is a scholarly journal published twice a year by The Hemingway Society and The University of Idaho.  
[http://hemingwaysociety.org/?page\\_id=10](http://hemingwaysociety.org/?page_id=10)

# Credits

## Works Cited

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Hemingway, Ernest. *A Moveable Feast*. 1964. New York: Scribner, 2003.

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Lynn, Kenneth S. *Hemingway*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

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